The BRONZE BELL

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS

CHAPTER I.

Destiny and the Babu.

Breaking suddenly upon the steady drumming of the trucks, the prolonged and husky roar of a locomotive whistle saluted an immediate grade-crossing.

Roused by this sound from his solitary musings in the parlor car of which he happened temporarily to be the sole occupant, Mr. David Amber put aside the magazine over which he had been dreaming, and looked out of the window, catching a glimpse of woodland road shining white between somber walls of stunted pine. Lazily he consulted his watch.

"It's not for nothing," he observed upensively, "that this railroad wears its reputation; we are consistently late."

His gaze, again diverted to the flying countryside, noted that it had changed character, pine yielding to scrub-oak and second-growth — the ragged vestments of an area some years since denuded by fire. This, too, presently swung away, giving place to cleared land—arable acres golden with the stubble of garnered harvests or sentinelled with unkempt shocks of corn.

In the south a shimmer of laughing gold and blue edged the faded horizon.

Eagerly the young man leaned forward, dark eyes lightening, lips parting as if already he could taste the savour of the sea.

Then, quite without warning, a deep elbow of the bay swept up almost to the railway, its surface mirror-like, profoundly blue, profoundly beautiful.

"I think," said the traveler softly—"I think it's mighty fine to be alive and—here!"

He lounged back comfortably again, smiling as he watched the wheeling landscape, his eyes glowing with expectancy. For his cares were negligible, his content boundless; he was experiencing, for the first time in many years, a sense of freedom akin to that felt by a schoolboy at the beginning of the summer vacation. The work of his heart and hand for a little time belonged equally to a forgotten Yesterday and an uncontemplated Tomorrow; he existed only for the confident Today. He had put behind him the haunts of men, and his yearning for the open places that lay before him was almost childlike in its fervency; he would, indeed, have been quite satisfied if assured that he was to find nothing to do save to play aimlessly in the sun. But, in point of fact, he looked forward to an employment much more pleasurable; he was off to shoot duck with his very dear friend, Mr. Authony Quain of Tanglewood lodge, Nokomis, Long Island.

Again the whistle bawled uncannily, and the train began to moderate its speed. Objects in the foreground that otherwise had been mere streaked blurs assumed recognizable contours. North of the line a string of squat, square, unlovely "frame" edifices, aligned upon a country road, drifted back. A brakeman popped head and shoulders into the car and out again, leaving the echo of an abrupt bark to be interpreted at the passenger's leisure.

Slowly jolting across a rutted, dusty road, the cars stopped. Amber, alighting, found himself upon a length of board-walk platform and confronted by a distressingly matter-of-fact wooden structure, combining the functions of waiting room and ticket and telegraph offices. From its eaves depended a weather-worn board bearing the legend: "Nokomis."

The train, pausing only long enough to disgorge from the baggage car a trunk or two and from the day coaches a thin trickle of passengers, flung on into the wilderness, cracked bell clanking somewhat disdainfully.

By degrees the platform cleared, the erstwhile patrons of the road and the station loafers—for the most part hall-marked natives of the region—straggling off upon their several ways, some afoot, a majority in dilapidated surreys and buckboards. Amber watched them go with unassumed indifference; their type interested him little. But in their company he presently discovered one, a figure so thoroughly foreign and aloof in attitude, that it caught his eye, and, having caught, held it clouded with perplexity.

Abruptly he abandoned his belongings and gave chase, overtaking the object of his attention at the far end of the station.

"Doggott!" he cried. "I say, Doggott!"

His hand, falling lightly upon the man's shoulder, brought him squarely about, his expression transiently startled, if not a shade truculent.

"Doggott, what the deuce brings you here? And Mr. Rutton?"

Amber's cordiality educed no response. The gray eyes, meeting eyes dark, kindly, and penetrating, flickered and fell; so much emotion they betrayed, no more, and that as disingenuous as you could wish.

"Doggott!" insisted Amber, disconcerted. "Surely you haven't forgotten me—Mr. Amber?"

The man shook his head. "Beg pardon, sir," he said; "you're got my name 'andy enough, but I don't know you, and—"

"But Mr. Rutton?"

"Is a party I've never 'eard of, if you'll excuse my sayin' so, no more'n I 'ave of yourself, sir."

"Well," began Amber; but paused, his face hardening as he looked the man up and down, nodding slowly.

"Per'aps," continued Mr. Doggott, unabashed, "you mistyke me for my brother, 'Enery Doggott. 'E was 'ome, in England, larst I 'eard of 'im. We look a deal alike, I've been told."

"You would be," admitted Amber drily; and, shutting his teeth upon his inherent contempt for a liar, he swung away, acknowledging with a curt nod the civil "Good arfternoon, sir," that followed him.

The man had disappeared by the time Amber regained his kit-bag and gun-case; standing over which he surveyed his surroundings with some annoyance, discovering that he now shared the station with none but the ticket agent. A shambling and disconsolate youth, clad in a three-days' growth of beard, a checked jumper and khaki trousers, this person lounged negligently in the doorway of the waiting room and, caressing his rusty chin with nicotine-dyed fingers, regarded the stranger in Nokomis with an air of subtle yet vaguely melancholy superiority.

"If ye're lookin' for th' hotel," he volunteered unexpectedly, "there ain't none," and effected a masterly retreat into the ticket booth.

Amused, the despised outlander picked up his luggage and followed amiably. "I'm not looking for the hotel that ain't," he said, planting himself in front of the grating; "but I expected to be met by some one from Tanglewood—"

"Thet's the Quain place, daown by th' ba-ay," interpolated the youth from unplumbed depths of mournful abstraction.

"It is. I wired yesterday—"

"Yeour name's Amber, ain't it?"

"Yes, I—"

"Well, Quain didn't get yeour message till this mornin'. I sent a kid daown with it 'baout ten o'clock."

"But why the—but I wired yesterday afternoon!"

"I knaow ye did," assented the youth wearily. "It come through raound closin' time and they wa'n't nobody baound that way, so I held it over."

"This craze for being characteristic," observed Mr. Amber obscurely, "is the only thing that really stands in the way of Nokomis becoming a thriving metropolis. Do you agree with me? No matter." He smiled engagingly; a seasoned traveler this, who could recognize the futility of bickering over the irreparable. Moreover, he had to remind himself in all fairness, the blame was, in part at least, his own; for he had thoughtlessly worded his telegram, "Will be with you tomorrow afternoon," and it was wholly like Quain that he should have accepted the statement at its face value, regardless of the date line.

"I can leave my things here for a little while, I presume?" Amber suggested after a pause.

The ticket agent stared stubbornly into the infinite, making no sign till a coin rang on the window-ledge; when he started, eyed the offering with fugitive mistrust, and gloomily possessed himself of it. "I'll look after them," he said. "Be ye thinkin' of walkin'?"

"Yes," said Amber over his shoulder. He was already moving toward the door.

"Knaow yeour wa-ay?"

"I've been here before, thank you."

Crossing the tracks, he addressed himself to the southward stretching highway. Walking briskly at first, he soon left behind the railway station with its few parasitic cottages, a dip in the land hid them, and he had hereafter for all company his thoughts, the desultory road, a vast and looming sky, and bare fields hedged with impoverished forest.

Amber had professed acquaintance with his way; it seemed rather to be intimacy, for when he chose to forsake the main traveled road he did so boldly, striking off upon a wagon track which, leading across the fields, delved presently into the heart of the forest.

The hush of the forest world bore heavily upon his senses; the slight and stealthy rustlings in the brush, the clear dense ringing of some remote ax, an attenuated clamor of cawing from some far crows' congress, but served to accentuate its influence.

Then into the silence crept a sound to rouse him from his formless reverie. At first a mere pulsing in the stillness, barely to be distinguished from the song of the surf; but presently a pounding, ever louder and more insistent. He paused, attentive; and while he waited the drumming, minute by minute gaining in volume, swept swiftly toward him—the rhythmic hoofbeats of a single horse madly ridden. When it was close upon him he stepped back into the tangled undergrowth, making room; for the track was anything but wide.

Simultaneously there burst into view, at the end of a brief aisle of trees, the horse—a vigorous black brute with white socks and muzzle—running freely, apparently under constraint neither of whip nor of spur. In the saddle a girl leaned low over the horn—a girl with eyes rapturous, face brilliant, lips parted in the least of smiles. A fold of her black habit-skirt, whipping out, almost snapped in Amber's face, so close to him she rode; yet she seemed not to see him, and very likely did not. A splendid sketch in black and white, of youthful spirit and joy of motion; so she passed on and was gone. . . .

Hardly, however, had the forest closed upon the picture, ere a cry, a heavy crashing as of a horse threshing about in the underbrush, and a woman's scream of terror, sent Amber, in one movement, out into the road again and running at a pace which, had he been conscious of it, would have surprised him.

A short 50 yards separated him from the bend in the way round which the horse and its rider had vanished. He had no more than gained this point than he was obliged to pull up sharply to avoid running into the girl herself.

Although dismounted, she was on her feet, and apparently uninjured. She stood with one hand against the trunk of a tree, on the edge of a small clearing wherein the axes of the local lumbermen had but lately been busy. Her horse had disappeared; the rumble of his hoofs, diminuendo, told the way he had gone.

So much Amber comprehended in a single glance; with a second he sought the cause of the accident, and identified it with a figure so outre and bizarre that he momentarily and excusably questioned the testimony of his senses.

At a little distance from the girl, in the act of addressing her, stood a man, obese, gross, abnormally distended with luxurious and sluggish living, as little common to the scene as a statue of Phoebus Apollo had been. A babu of Bengal, every inch of him, from his dirty red-and-white turban to his well-worn and cracked patent-leather shoes. His body was enveloped in a complete suit of emerald silk, much soiled and faded, and girt with a sash of many colors, crimson predominating. His hands, fat, brown, and not overclean, alternately fluttered apologetically and rubbed one another with a suggestion of extreme urbanity; his lips, thick, sensual, and cruel, mouthed a broken stream of babu-English; while his eyes, nearly as small and quite as black as shoe buttons—eyes furtive, crafty, and cold—suddenly distended and became fixed, as with amazement, at the instant of Amber's appearance.

Instinctively, as soon as he had mastered his initial stupefaction, Amber stepped forward and past the girl, placing himself between her and this preposterous apparition, as if to shield her. He held himself wary and alert, and was instant to halt the babu when he, with the air of a dog cringing to his master's feet for punishment, would have drawn nearer.

"Stop right there!" Amber told him crisply; and got for response obedience, a low salaam, and the Hindu salutation accorded only to persons of high rank: "Hazoor!" But before the babu could say more the American addressed the girl. "What did he do?" he inquired, without looking at her. "Frighten your horse?"

"Just that." The girl's tone was edged with temper. "He jumped out from behind that woodpile; the horse shied and threw me."

"You're not hurt, I trust?"

"No—thank you; but"—with a nervous laugh—"I'm furiously angry."

"That's reasonable enough." Amber returned undivided attention to the Bengali. "Now then," he demanded sternly, "what've you got to say for yourself? What do you mean by frightening this lady's horse? What are you doing here, anyway?"

Almost groveling, the babu answered him in Urdu: "Hazoor, I am yeur slave—"

Without thinking Amber couched his retort in the same tongue: "Count yourself lucky you are not, dog!"

"Nay, hazoor, but I meant no harm. I was resting, being fatigued, in the shelter of the wood, when the noise of hoofs disturbed me and I stepped out to see. When the woman was thrown I sought to assist her, but she threatened me with her whip."

"That is quite true," the girl cut in over Amber's shoulder. "I don't think he intended to harm me, but it's purely an accident that he didn't."

Inasmuch as the babu's explanation had been made in fluent, vernacular Urdu, Amber's surprise at the girl's evident familiarity with that tongue was hardly to be concealed. "You understand Urdu?" he stammered.

"Aye," she told him in that tongue, "and speak it, too."

"You know this man, then?"

"No. Do you?"

"Not in the least. How should I?"

"You yourself speak Urdu."

"Well, but—" The situation hardly lent itself to such a discussion; he had the babu first to dispose of. Amber resumed his cross-examination. "Who are you?" he demanded. "And what is your business in this place?"

The fat yellowish-brown face was distorted by a fugitive grimace of deprecation. "Hazoor, I am Behari Lal Chatterji, solicitor, of the Inner Temple."

"Well? And your business here?"

"Hazoor, that is for your secret ear." The babu drew himself up, assuming a certain dignity. "It is not meet that the message of the Bell should be uttered in the hearing of an Englishwoman, hazoor."

"What are you drivelling about?" In his blank wonder, Amber returned to English as to a tongue more suited to his urgent need of forcible expression. "And, look here, you stop calling me 'Hazoor.' I'm no more a hazoor than you are—idiot!"

"Nay," contended the babu reproachfully; "is it right that you should seek to hoodwink me? Have I not eyes with which to see, ears that can hear you speak our tongue, hazoor? I am no child, to be played with—I, the appointed Mouthpiece of the Voice!"

"I know naught of your 'Voice' or its mouthpiece; but certainly you are no child. You are either mad, or insolent—or a fool to be kicked." And in exasperation Amber took a step toward the man as if to carry into effect his implied threat.

Alarmed, the babu cringed and retreated a pace; then, suddenly, raising an arm, indicated the girl. "Hazoor!" he cried. "Be quick—the woman faints!" And as Amber hastily turned, with astonishing agility the babu sprang toward him.

Warned by his moving shadow as much as by the girl's cry, Amber leapt aside and lifted a hand to strike; but before he could deliver a blow it was caught and a small metallic object thrust into it. Upon this his fingers closed instinctively, and the babu sprang back, panting and quaking.

"The Token, hazoor, the Token!" he quavered. "It is naught but that—the Token!"

"Token, you fool!" cried Amber, staring stupidly at the man. "What in thunder—!"

"Nay, hazoor; how should I tell you now, when another sees and hears? At another time, hazoor, in a week, or a day, or an hour, mayhap, I come again—for your answer. Till then and forever I am your slave, hazoor; the dust beneath your feet. Now I go."

And with a haste that robbed the courtesy of its grace, the Bengali salaamed, then wheeled square about and, hitching his clothing round him, made off with a celerity surprising in one of his tremendous bulk, striking directly into the heart of the woods.

Amber was left to knit his brows over the object which had been forced upon him so unexpectedly.

It proved to be a small, cubical box, something more than an inch square, fashioned of bronze and elaborately decorated with minute relief work in the best manner of ancient Indian craftsmanship.

"May I see, please?" The voice of the girl at his side recalled to Amber her existence. "May I see, too, please, Mr. Amber?" she repeated.

So She Passed and Was Gone.

CHAPTER II.

The Girl and the Token.

In his astonishment he looked round quickly to meet the gaze of mischievous eyes that strove vainly to seem simple and sincere.

Aware that he faced an uncommonly pretty woman, who chose to study him with a straightforward interest he was nothing loath to imitate, he took time to see that she was very fair of skin, with that creamy, silken whiteness that goes, with hair of the shade commonly and unjustly termed red. Her nose he thought a trace too severely perfect in its modeling, but redeemed by a broad and thoughtful brow, a strong yet absolutely feminine chin, and a mouth . . . Well, as to her mouth, the young man selected a rosebud to liken it to.

Having catalogued these several features, he had a mental portrait of her he was not likely soon to forget. For it's not every day that one encounters so pretty a girl in the woods of Long Island's southern shore—or anywhere else, for that matter. He felt sure of this.

But he was equally certain that he was as much a stranger to her as she to him.

She, on her part, had been busy satisfying herself that he was a very presentable young man, in spite of the somewhat formidable reputation he wore as a person of learned attainments. If his looks attracted, it was not because he was handsome, for that he wasn't, but because of certain signs of strength to be discerned in his face, as well as an engaging manner which he owned by right of ancestry, his ascendants for several generations having been notable representatives of one of the First Families of Virginia.

The pause which fell upon the girl's use of his name, and during which they looked one another over, was sufficiently prolonged to excuse the reference to it which Amber chose to make.

"I'm sure," he said with his slow smile, "that we're satisfied we've never met before. Aren't we?"

"Quite," assented the girl.

"That only makes it the more mysterious, of course."

"Yes," said she provokingly; "doesn't it?"

"You know, you're hardly fair to me," he asserted. "I'm rapidly beginning to entertain doubts of my senses. When I left the train at Nokomis station I met a man I know as well as I know myself—pretty nearly; and he denied me to my face. Then, a little later, I encounter a strange, mad Bengali, who apparently takes me for somebody he has business with. And finally, you call me by name.

"It isn't so very remarkable, when you come to consider it," she returned soberly. "Mr. David Amber is rather well known, even in his own country. I might very well have seen your photograph published in connection with some review of—let me see. . . . Your latest book was entitled 'The Peoples of the Hindu Kush,' wasn't it? You see, I haven't read it."

"That's sensible of you, I'm sure. Why should you? . . . But your theory doesn't hold water, because I won't permit my publishers to print my picture, and, besides, reviews of such stupid books generally appear in profound monthlies which abhor illustrations."

"Oh!" She received this with a note of disappointment. "Then my explanation won't do?"

"I'm sorry," he laughed, "but you'll have to be more ingenious—and practical."

"And you won't show me the present the babu made you?"

He closed his fingers jealously over the bronze box. "Not until . . ."

"You insist on reciprocity?"

"Absolutely."

"That's very unkind of you."

"How?" he demanded blankly.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

His Self-Defense.

"When a man's married," said Rose Stahl, "his excuses begin. "Did you ever hear how Sambo got out of it when he was caught in the turkey coop?"

"'Deed, mistah,' he said, "'deed sah, I isn't a-stealin' dis yah bird. I'se takin' it in self-defense. Hones' I is!'

"'Self-defense?' roared the indignant owner, shaking him by the collar. 'What kind of a lie are you trying to tell me?'

"'Please, sah,' wailed the much-abused Sambo, 'mah wife she say ef I doan' fotch home a turkey she gwine to break ebery bone in mah body. An' so I jes' 'bleeged ter pertect mah se'f!'"—Young's Magazine.

Blank Filled Corectly.

"When Lizzie Timms filled out her application blank to teach school," laughs the neighbor, "she wrote on the line asking what her age was, 'My age is twenty years old.' Wasn't that a ludicrous mistake?"

"Oh, I don't know. You misunderstand it. She was honest. She was giving the age of her age, not of herself. She has claimed to be twenty for about that long."—Judge.

The Onlooker

by WILBUR D. NESBIT

A LATTERDAY PIRATE

We met a man upon a ship a-sailing on the lake;
He raised his fist and smote the air with hotly wrathful shake;
"I know that Captain Kidd is dead, and Blackbeard's crew no more
Sends terror to the hearts of folk who dare to leave the shore—
But there's a pirate here on board who gold and treasure snatches;
He just charged me a nickel for a penny box of matches!

"There is no Long Tom on the deck, no cutlasses are stacked
Along the rail all ready for the folks that must be hacked;
There is no jolly roger flapping wildly at the peak
To chill the blood and send the ghastly white into the cheek,
But any minute we may see them batten down the hatches—
I've just been charged a nickel for a penny box of matches!

"I'll stand for ten cents more for any quarter magazine,
I will not howl or groan or growl or speak in language keen
At being soaked a dime for what are just five cent cigars—
But, O, I looked for powder marks and grisly saber scars
On his young face, for well I know his treasure's hid in batches—
He just charged me a nickel for a penny box of matches!

"I know that Captain Kidd is dead with all his cruel crew;
Pierre Lafitte and all the rest have met their fatal due,
And piracy upon the wave is thought to be no more"—
And here his voice grew loud and strong and lifted to a roar—
"But O, the news stand boy is one who every dollar catches—
He just charged me a nickel for a penny box of matches."

Plutarch.

Mr. Plutarch was one of the best-known writers of his time. He is said to have written more lives than Murat Halstead did, but this statement cannot be proven successfully.

Plutarch was the Elbert Hubbard of his time, however. He would ostensibly write the biography of some famous Grecian, but this he would contrast unfavorably with the life of one of his own countrymen. His little visits to the homes of great men were among the best sellers in his day and age.

When he was in his prime his country was flooded with book agents who worked by the Sheldon method of salesmanship. Plutarch kept a flock of geese to furnish quills for him.

Today his Lives are a fixture in every library. One would as soon think of omitting the shelves as to omit Plutarch's "Lives" and Dante's "Inferno," or Milton's "Paradise Lost." The latter are nice books for a library; they look intellectual and they are the despair of electricians.

Plutarch could have found lots of material today. He would have been a good editor for the Congressional Directory.

Cruel.

"And you are going to select your spring hat tomorrow?" Mr. Penhecker says to his wife.

"I am," she replies, without heeding his shuddering sigh as he thinks of her having all his money banked in her name.

"I am," she continues, with compressed jaws, "and what is more, Henry Penhecker, you are going with me to see me select it."

More for the Menu.

In time, such were the marvelous strides made by inventors, the cry arose:

"The automobile must go."

Whereat some people murmured:

"This is too much!"

For they remembered the dreary days when horse meat graced the table, with trotting stock on fast days.

Self Respect.

"But," argues the fond wife, when the spring bonnet discussion is on, "you acknowledge that Mrs. Jimblum's new hat is perfectly beautiful. It didn't cost any more than the one I want."

"I know it's a beautiful hat—an artistic creation, in fact. But do you suppose I want people to think I'm as big a fool as Jimblum?"

Wilbur D. Nesbit.